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ABSTRACT

Prospective teachers in many states must pass a competency test prior to receiving an initial teaching certificate. Because of the high stakes associated with them, educator competency tests can play a major role in modifying the nature of teacher training programs. To investigate the nature and extent of such changes, deans and faculty at teacher education institutions in four states that require testing for teacher certification were interviewed (California, Louisiana, Florida, and Georgia). It was found that a number of program modifications have been made in reaction to the requirement that prospective teachers pass competency tests. The modifications have been made in three areas: entrance requirements; curricula (e.g., courses added or modified); and student evaluation (e.g., more testing). (Author/JD)

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The Impact on Preparation Institutions of Competency Tests for Educators

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The Impact on Preparation Institutions of Competency Tests for Educators*

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The current school reform movement continues to gain momentum. In the last two years, states have increased graduation requirements, raised teachers' salaries, expanded student testing, provided increased financial support for the schools, and toughened teacher certification requirements. Foremost in the strengthened certification requirements are competency tests that prospective teachers are required to pass in order to receive a credential.

Teacher certification tests are not new--they were administered as early as the 18th Century--but seem to be enjoying a revival. The current teacher testing revival began in 1964 when North Carolina required prospective teachers to take the National Teacher Examinations (NTE). By 1976, four states (North Carolina, South Carolina, West Virginia, and Mississippi) required the passing of the NTE as a condition of certification. Currently, 22 states require that aspiring teachers pass a test to receive an initial teaching credential (Goertz, Ekstrom, & Coley, 1984). The type of test used and the content tested vary considerably among the states. Applicants for certification are tested in basic skills (14 states), general knowledge (9 states), professional knowledge (12 states), and/or a specialty area (14 states).

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Teacher competency testing is supported by the public and, increasingly so, by teachers themselves. A 1983 Gallup poll found that 90 percent of the public favor competency tests for teachers (cited in Krathwohl, 1983). More recently, Albert Shanker, president of the American Federation of Teachers, which is an advocate of teacher testing, called for the establishment of a national professional examination for teachers. He proposed that the test be similar to those required by the medical and legal professions (Currence, 1985).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the impact that competency testing for teacher certification has had on teacher education programs at institutions of higher education. This paper will not deal with the impact of teacher competency tests on enrollment in teacher education programs, on the ethnic composition of the teaching force, or on the general supply of teachers. These factors have been addressed elsewhere. (See Dilworth, 1984; Kauchak, 1984; Mercer, 1983; Smith, 1984). Rather, this paper will focus on the modifications made to teacher education programs in reaction to the requirement that prospective teachers pass competency tests.

Method

The primary sources of information for this report were telephone interviews with personnnel from institutions with teacher education programs in four states: California, Florida, Louisiana, and Georgia. (A list of persons interviewed is attached.) These states were chosen because they each have a different type of teacher certification requirement. Institutions within states were selected based on the suggestions of state department of education

officials. Persons interviewed at institutions were also asked to suggest other institutions. The person interviewed was usually the dean of the school of education or a person suggested by the dean. Generalizations from the data presented here should be made cautiously because institutions were not randomly selected.

Additional information for this report was obtained from articles and reports about the topic. These were used to obtain general information about teacher testing as well as specific information about the testing program in each state.

Findings

The results are presented below separately for each state. Following a description of the state's teacher testing program is a summary of the impact the program has had on some of the state's teacher education programs.

California

Since February 1983, applicants for teaching and service credentials in California have been required to pass the California Basic Educational Skills Test (CBEST). The CBEST is designed to assess college-level skills in reading comprehension, English composition, and mathematical reasoning. The reading and mathematics sections are multiple-choice. The writing section requires a writing sample. To pass the CBEST, an examinee must achieve a minimal total score as well as minimal scores on each of the three sections. Prospective teachers may take the test as often as necessary and must retake only the section(s) failed. The law was amended in 1983 to require that students take, but not necessarily pass, the CBEST prior to admission to a teacher education program.

The purpose of this policy is to provide students with diagnostic information.

Personnel from seven public institutions that have teacher education programs and one person in the State Department of Education were interviewed. Interviewees from six of the seven schools reported that few or no changes have been made in their teacher education programs in response to the CBEST requirement. This is because the CBEST measures general reading, writing, and mathematics skills, which are not the responsibility of teacher education programs. One administrator asserted that teacher education programs are unjustly the victims of the CBEST program because results are reported in such a way that they reflect on schools of education, even though the skills tested are not taught in teacher education programs. Any reactions to the CBEST requirement, then, have been most often focussed on undergraduate programs.

Two types of reactions to the CBEST have occurred at some of the institutions in this study. These involve requiring students to pass the CBEST prior to the end of their teacher education program and providing CBEST related preparation and remediation. As mentioned above, California law requires that students take, but not necessarily pass, the CBEST before admission to a teacher education program. A number of institutions in California (four among those represented in this report) now require that students pass the CBEST either as an admission requirement or as a requirement before beginning their student teaching.

The law does not require remediation for students who fail the CBEST, but at five of the institutions in this study there are programs to prepare students for the CBEST, or to provide

remediation to students who have failed it. This most often occurs in a university learning assistance laboratory where individual and group tutoring are available to all students. One institution offers a one-quarter, four-unit CBEST preparation course, and tutoring and preparation workshops are common at other schools.

Two schools have developed practice CBEST tests. Students are encouraged to take the practice test as early as possible before taking the CBEST. Results of the practice test are used to counsel students. Students who don't pass are either advised to take specific courses or are provided with individualized instruction or tutoring. One campus provides computer-assisted instruction for this purpose. Students can take the practice test as often as necessary until they feel able to pass the CBEST.

Florida

As of 1980, prospective teachers seeking certification in Florida must pass the Florida Teacher Certification Examination (FTCE). This applies to new graduates of teacher education programs, teachers who have just moved to Florida, and Florida teachers who possess only a temporary certificate or who have let their regular certificates lapse for more than one year. The current FTCE includes subtests in reading, writing, mathematics, and professional education. The reading, mathematics, and professional education subtests consist of multiple-choice items. On the writing subtest, examinees must write an essay.

A law effective in 1983 requires that state-accredited

teacher education programs achieve at least an 80 percent pass rate on the FTCE to maintain state approval. That is, if less than 80 percent of a program's graduates pass the test, that program would lose approval. In July, 1983, 35 of Florida's 436 teacher education programs lost approval because of high failure rates. (Most institutions have more than one program.) Due to lack of sufficient lead time and data processing difficulties, however, the state legislature amended the law to give programs two more years before facing the loss of state approval. The programs that had lost approval were reinstated following their submission of plans for improvement to the Florida State Department of Education. In July, 1985, the pass rate of each teacher education program, aggregated over five years, will be computed. Those programs with less than an 80 percent pass rate will lose state approval.

Interviews were conducted with two officials in the State Department of Education and personnel from one private and six public colleges and universities with teacher education programs. A variety of modifications to teacher education programs was reported. Five schools have made modifications to their entrance requirements. This was most often accomplished by requiring applicants to pass basic skills tests prior to admission. (The state already requires that applicants score at or above the 40th percentile on the SAT or the ACT.) At one institution, basic skills tests in mathematics and writing that are university-wide graduation requirements have been made entrance requirements for teacher education programs. Other schools have implemented basic skills screening examinations similar in content and format to

the FTCE. Students who fail the screening test are assigned to remedial courses and may take the test again. At one school, the lower division course requirements for admission to teacher education programs have been increased.

Curricular changes have also been made at most of the Florida institutions involved in this study. These changes include modifications in course content as well as the addition of new courses. Course syllabi have been analyzed to determine whether, in the set of education classes a student takes, all of the essential competencies tested on the FTCE are covered. Where necessary, content has been added to courses or given more emphasis than before. At one institution, an internal task force reviewed all of the teacher education programs, resulting in a reorganization of the programs and changes in curricula so that the FTCE competencies are adequately addressed.

New courses have also been added to some teacher education programs. These include methods courses and a course in tests and measurement. At one institution, new courses in reading, writing, and mathematics have been created specifically to address the skills tested on the FTCE. At another, a series of three, 3-hour review sessions is offered at the end of the teacher education program. The sessions cover reading, mathematics, professional education, and general test-taking skills.

Institutions are also requiring more testing of their students after the students have been admitted to a program. Students at three institutions must pass a test before beginning their internship, or student teaching, which is typically the

final phase of teacher training. At one school, students must pass all four sections of the FTCE prior to beginning student teaching. (This requirement will be fully implemented by January 1986.) At another institution, students must pass the reading, writing, and mathematics sections of the FTCE before beginning their student teaching.

At one university, education students are assessed at various points thoughout their programs. They must pass a simulated FTCE in the areas of reading, writing, and mathematics prior to admission to a program. They must pass the final examination of each professional education course they take. Prior to student teaching, they must pass the professional education section of the simulated FTCE. Finally, these students must pass all four sections (i.e., reading, writing, mathematics, professional education) of a simulated FTCE prior to graduation.

Georgia

The Georgia State Board of Education requires that all applicants for initial certification who completed an approved teacher education program after September 1, 1978, pass a Teacher Certification Test (TCT) of the basic knowledge of their certification fields. Applicants who add a new certification field after September 1, 1980, must also pass a TCT in each new field.

The TCTs are separate content knowledge tests for each of the fields in which teachers are certified (e.g., early childhood, reading specialist, etc.). They are criterion-referenced tests developed to reflect the minimal content knowledge in a certification field that a teacher would be expected to know in order to be a competent teacher. Applicants who fail a test may

teach for one year with a probationary license and may retake the test as often they wish.

As in Florida, there are consequences for teacher education programs based on the pass rates of their graduates. On November 8, 1983, the Georgia State Board of Regents, the governing board of Georgia's 33 public institutions of higher education, instituted a probation policy for teacher education programs in public institutions whose graduates over the past five years have had a cumulative pass rate of less than 70 percent on the TCT. About 40 programs in 12 institutions have been affected by this policy. These programs were placed on "probationary review" for a period of two years, and each had to submit a plan for improvement. After the spring 1986 administration of the TCT, one of three decisions will be made about each program. The program will either be discontinued, continued on probationary review for a specified time period, or removed from probationary review.

Interviews were conducted with one official of the State Board of Regents and personnel from seven public and two private institutions with teacher education programs. Five of the public schools have programs on probationary review.

The person interviewed at one of the two private schools reported high pass rates on the TCT for that institution's graduates and indicated that no changes have been made in any programs in reaction to the requirement that graduates take the TCT.

At seven of the nine Georgia institutions in this study, course syllabi have been revised so that objectives tested on the TCT are covered. In some cases, significant blocks of content

have been added to already existing courses. Examples cited were test-taking skills and women's and minority literature. At one institution, the objectives tested on the TCT have been marked with an asterisk on each course's syllabus. These objectives receive priority over other course objectives which are not tested on the TCT. At this institution, instructors are required to include items similar to those on the TCT on course tests.

Four institutions have implemented review activities covering TCT objectives. These activities range from non-required, informal review sessions to a required series of three one-quarter courses called "Senior Seminars." The state provides study guides for the TCT which are often used in these review activities. At one school, an expert is developing a college-wide program in test-taking skills.

In contrast to the teacher education institutions in Florida, no institution in Georgia reported increasing, on its own, the entrance requirements to teacher education programs. This is probably because as recently as fall 1984, the state legislature raised the entrance requirements for all programs.

Louisiana

In 1977, the Louisiana legislature passed a law requiring that all applicants for teacher certification pass an examination that includes English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, and knowledge of the applicant's area of specialization. The legislature did not specify the test to be used or the passing score. Both of these decisions were left to the state superintendent of public instruction. The superintendent chose the

National Teacher Examinations (NTE) and convened a panel of teacher educators to recommend passing scores for certification in various subject areas.

When the testing requirement became effective in 1978, the NTE consisted of a common examination, which measured general professional knowledge and skills in English and mathematics, and area exams, which measured understanding of the content and methods relevant to separate subject areas. A new form of the NTE was introduced in the fall of 1982. The new core battery tests, which replace the common examination, include tests of professional knowledge, general knowledge, and communication skills including reading, writing, and listening. Prospective teachers must pass the core battery tests and, if there is one available, an area examination. They may take the tests as many times as necessary.

Unlike in Florida and Georgia, in Louisiana approval of teacher education programs does not depend on graduates' test scores. The state standards for program approval were rewritten in 1983. The issue was brought up and supported by business and industry leaders, but the State Board decided against it.

Interviews were conducted with one State Department of Education official and personnel from seven institutions with teacher education programs, two of which were private. The persons interviewed from both private schools indicated that there have been no changes in their teacher education programs in response to the NTE requirement. One of these schools reported using the NTE as a graduation requirement for the last 30 years. The other school reported that over 90 percent of its graduates

pass the NTE.

In the Louisiana public institutions involved in this study, the same types of activities as those occurring in institutions in Florida and Georgia were reported, but to a lesser extent. All five have used the competencies on the NTE and the test results of their students to make curricular changes. These changes include revisions in course syllabi and the addition of new coursework.

A state law that will become effective in September 1985 requires that applicants to teacher education programs in Louisiana pass a minimum competency examination as an entrance requirement. The choice of test is left to the institutions. Two institutions reported that the NTE's communication skills test and/or the NTE's general knowledge test will be used for this purpose.

Two institutions reported that they had implemented activities to increase students' test-taking skills and reduce students' test-related anxiety. At one school, voluntary seminars were offered; at the other, a one-semester elective course in test-taking skills was developed.

Summary

California, Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana all require that prospective teachers pass a certification test. This requirement has had an impact on teacher education programs, expressed in terms of program modifications, in all four states. Changes have been made in three areas:

--entrance requirements

--curricula (e.g., courses added or modified)

--student evaluation (e.g., more testing)

The extent and nature of these program changes vary across the four states and seem to be related to the possibility of sanctions against programs and the content tested on the certification test. More institutions reported more program modifications in Florida and Georgia, where programs face loss of approval, than in California and Louisiana, where they don't. The fewest program changes have occurred in California, where only basic skills in reading, writing, and mathematics are tested. More changes were reported in Florida, Georgia, and Louisiana, where professional skills are assessed.

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*One interviewee requested anonymity.

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Abstract

Prospective teachers in many states must pass a competency test prior to receiving an initial teaching certificate. Because of the high stakes associated with them, educator competency tests can play a major role in modifying the nature of teacher training programs. To investigate the nature and extent of such changes, teacher training program personnel in four states that require testing for teacher certification were interviewed. It was found that a number of program modifications have been made in reaction to the requirement that prospective teachers pass competency tests. The modifications have been made in three areas: entrance requirements, curricula (e.g., courses added or modified), and student evaluation (e.g., more testing).